Washington the Man---His Human Side Revealed---His Physical and Intellectual Defects---Neighbor and Friend and Lover

Washington, D. C., February 19.—While knowledge of George Washington's official side is a necessity, acquaintance with his human side is only a rare luxury of our education. We leave school or college fairly intimate with Washington the soldier and the statesman, but ignorant of Washington the man, and our chance meetings with the first American in this latter role occur only in the course of our incidental and accidental browsings in pastures literary. But that the world may now become better acquainted with Washington the neighbor and friend, the husband and lover—the man in the flesh—the Library of Congress is now having repaired and substantially mounted, bound and carefully catalogued, the government's vast and priceless but long neglected collection of Washington manuscripts, some 50,000 human documents, mostly letters from, to and descriptive of this great immortal, whose 178th birthday we shall celebrate Tuesday next.

His Physical Charms and Defects.

As described by his friend, George Mercer, about the time of his marriage, or when twenty-seven, he was "as straight as an Indian, measuring six feet two inches in his stockings, and weighing 175 pounds." He had well developed muscles, large bones and joints, big feet and hands, wide shoulders, but a chest neither deep nor round. He was "neat waisted," but broad across the hips, and his head was "not large," although his neck was "superb." His nose was "large and straight rather than prominent," his eyes blue-gray, penetrating, widely separated and overhung by heavy brows.

He was long-faced, with high, round cheek bones and a firm chin, and his hair, worn in a cue, was dark brown. He had "clear, though rather a colorless pale skin, which burns with the sun," and his mouth was "large and generally firmly closed, but which from time to time disclosed some defective teeth."

When thirty-one he described himself to his tailor as "six feet high and proportionably made—if anything rather slender than thick for a person of that height, with pretty long arms and thighs." By the time he was fifty-one his weight had increased to 210, or thirty-five pounds over what he carried at the time of his marriage.

He was pock-marked, in addition to having defective teeth. His attack of the awful disease which marked him for life was contracted at the age of nineteen, while with his invalid brother in Babadoes. When fifty-seven, in the year of his first inauguration, Senator Maclay, describing him "as he really is," said he was of unexceptionable make, but lax appearance, and complained that "his frame would seem to want filling up," that his complexion was pale, nay, almost cadaverous," and that his voice was "hollow and indistinct, owing, as I believe, to artificial teeth before his upper jaw, which occasions a flatness."

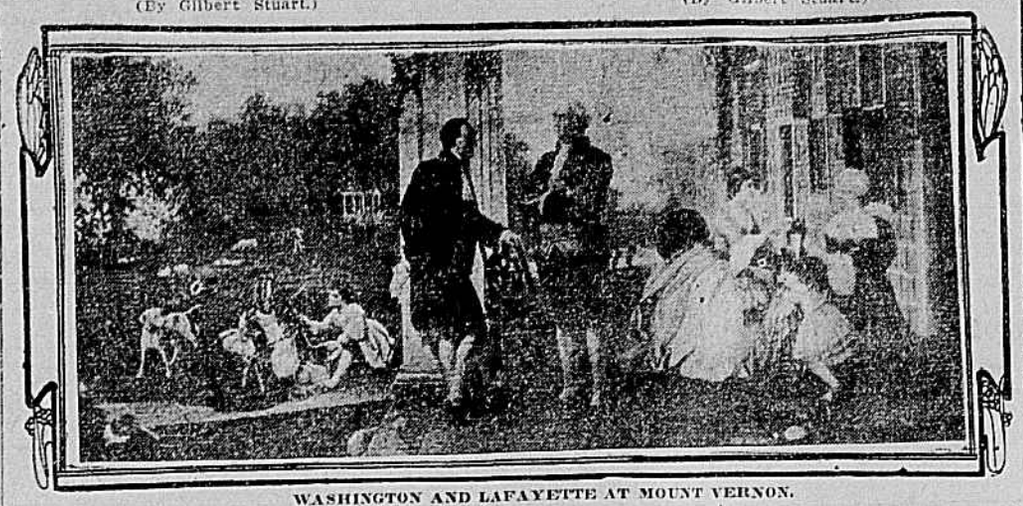
"Projection of the lower jaw" was mentioned a year later as one of his peculiarities, as was a thick nose, "too coarsely and strongly formed," and several critics note that his head was small. Gilbert Stuart, the eminent painter of his portrait, said that the sockets of his eyes were larger than any that he had seen before, "and the upper part of his nose broader." When he was sixty-five he was described as still of his natural erectness, but without "the soldierly air which might be expected." Yet even his severest critics speak with enthusiasm of the majesty of his exterior, his commanding presence, the bening dignity of his countenance, his expression of benevolence, nobility and self-possession. In the winter of his life he was described as having "pensive eyes" and a "settled aspect of melancholy."

That portraiture has failed to show us the real Washington is the opinion of several writers who studied him after he became President and who lamented that "there are few portraits which resemble him," that his face had an expression which "no painter had succeeded in taking" and that "no picture accurately resembles him in the minute traits of his person." He writes of himself that while posing for the Peale portrait he was in a grave and sullen mood, and part of the time asleep. And when Stuart was painting the most famous of his portraits he sat with his lips padded out with cotton to hide defects caused by the bad fit of his front pair of false teeth. But later he got better teeth, of hipoppotamus tusk, which he wore while sitting for a miniature by Sharpless, which was regarded by many as his best likeness.

MRS. WASHINGTON.
(By Gilbert Stuart.)

WASHINGTON WHEN PRESIDENT.
(By Gilbert Stuart.)

WASHINGTON AT TWENTY-ONE.
Portrait lately discovered in Glasgow; painter unknown.



WASHINGTON AND LAFAYETTE AT MOUNT VERNON.

Poor Speller and Read Little.

That he "spelled like a gentleman" is revealed by these letters in the vast government collection. Thus he wrote "extravagence," "winder," "latten" (for Latin), etc. But his education was finished only at a little village school in Fredericksburg, whence he departed a poor grammarian, although a fair hand at arithmetic. His grammar, however, he improved in later life, until he had mastered an elegance of style. His penmanship, always uniform, graceful and distinct, followed closely the stereotyped copies in "The Young Man's Companion," which he studied industriously, and which contained instruction in a great variety of subjects, from carpentry to etiquette, and from ciphering to doctoring.

But throughout his life Washington read but little, and what books he did peruse were chiefly on agriculture and military science. A complete catalogue of his library, printed this winter for the first time, reveals, however, that he had an extensive collection of books. Books of fiction are, however, very few and far between, and you could almost count them on your fingers—"Gil Blas," "Peregrin Pickle," "Gulliver," "Humphrey Clinker," "Don Quixote" and a few others.

There are a few volumes of miscellaneous verse and the remainder of the hundreds of volumes are essays or works of the informative class. He had the American encyclopaedia, Shambeaud's and Johnson's dictionaries and there are no end of text books on gardening and farming. In his diaries he never mentioned reading.

Washington's religion has long been a subject of dispute. President Taft's fellow churchmen, the Unitarians, claim he was a Deist, or virtually of their faith. Although baptized in the Episcopal Church, one time a vestryman there, and long a pew holder at Christ Church, Alexandria, he attended services during middle life only once in three or four Sundays, and on communion Sundays he left before the sacrament, while he did not kneel during the services. Jefferson quotes Gouverneur Morris as stating, in regard to orthodoxy, "that General Washington believed no more in that system than he did himself." It was once complained by some of the clergy that Washington had never said a word to the public which showed a belief in Christianity.

Loved Dancing and Teas.

He was fond of dancing, afternoon teas and picnics. His diaries refer over and over again to his attendance at balls. Even during the revolution he indulged this fondness for the terpsichorean art at the quarters of his generals, and it is recorded that once during this time "His excellency and Mrs. Green danced upward of three hours without once sitting down." And General Knox wrote that of one of these routs "we danced all night." The night that he resigned his commission in Annapolis "the general danced in every set," and when sixty-four he was still gayly tripping the light fantastic. His diaries are also full of references to his drinking, here and there, afternoon tea, which at Mount Vernon was regularly served upon the wide portico facing the river, and which during the war was as punctually served at the general's headquarters.

At Mount Vernon he ceremoniously powdered his hair for dinner, at which were served the luxuries of the day, including wine—often champagne—with which he toasted "All our friends." He was very fond of the theatre, and when President frequently entertained at box parties, and when in his twenties had an ambition for amateur acting. In his younger days he was also fond of circuses, puppet shows, wax works and concerts.

Although reserved and always dignified among strangers, among his inmost circle of friends "no man seemed more to enjoy gay conversation, though," as Madison wrote, "he took little part in it himself." Yet he was ready with his reply when occasion offered. Once, while he was commander-in-chief, Clinton sent him a letter addressed simply, "Mr. George Washington." Glancing at the address, he said to the messenger, "This letter is directed to a planter in the State of Virginia. I shall have it delivered to him at the end of the war. Till that time it shall not be opened." And shortly there came, under the flag of truce, another dispatch, addressed to "His Excellency," General Washington." Yet he suffered from stage fright when called upon to make a speech, and when Adams started to propose him to Congress for general of the Continental Army, he "from his usual modesty," darted out of the chamber.

He had a high temper, but kept it under close control. "If, however, it broke its bounds, he was tremendous in his wrath," wrote Jefferson. Gilbert Stuart said that "all his features were indicative of the strongest and most ungovernable passions, and, had he been born in the forests, he would have been the fiercest man among the savage tribes."

Was a Sport.

Washington was a born speculator. At Mount Vernon he was constantly engaged in land deals, and during the Revolution he tried to get a share in a privateering enterprise. He was also an enthusiastic patron of the raffles and lotteries which were fashionable in his day.

From the time that he was in his twenties until he was well advanced in his sixties he made repeated entries on his accounts of sums ranging upward to £50, invested in lottery tickets. When thirty-four he made £16 on £6 thus invested. He put up £1 in a raffle for a necklace, £1 4 shillings for a chance on the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and he entered other raffles for glasses, a coach, a pair of silver buckles, a watch, a gun, etc. He was also fond of gaming and one entry in his diary stated that he was "at home all day over cards," but his diary records his largest gain as £3. However, he once lost £9 11 shillings and 9 pence. The record shows that he was generally unlucky at cards. He was fond of billiards, horse-racing and fox-hunting. Inded from boyhood he was passionately fond of horses. Jefferson called him "the best horseman of his age." He subscribed generously to the races and ran his horses at them. He would go to Annapolis or even as far as Philadelphia to attend the races. And he rode to the hounds until 62, when he fell off and sprained his back. He went "ducking" for teals, sprig-tails and Mallards along the Potomac marshes, and at other times he went "a dragging for sturgeon," or angling for other of the finny tribes. He also attended cock fights when the chance offered.

Mother Embarrassed Him.

Washington's real relations with his mother were quite in contrast to those painted in our children's books. The more recent biographers paint her as illiterate, untidy and complaining, while the tradition was that she smoked a pipe, and she has been blamed for not having been a Spartan mother, for, because of fear for his safety, she prevented his entering the navy and later objected to his becoming a soldier. Although her son, George seems to have taken little trouble to be with her after he fell heir to Mount Vernon; he yet did more for her than her other children—let her keep a part of his share of the father's estate and purchased for her "a commodious house, garden and lotts (of her own choosing) in Fredericksburg, that she might be near my sister, Lewis, her only daughter."

He also answered all her calls for money, but yet the old lady had such a "poor mouth" that a movement was once started during the Revolution to have the Virginia Legislature pension her. This amazed and incensed the general, who soon put a stop to it. Later he addressed her: "Hon'd Madam: In consequence of your communication to George Washington of your want of money," etc., and advised her to break up housekeeping and live with one of her children. He places Mount Vernon at her disposal, but adds that since the war his house is like a public tavern, always full of strangers, among whom she would have to "do one of three things; 1st, to be always dressing to appear in company; 2d, to come into (their presence) in a dishabille, or, 3d, to be as it were a prisoner in your own chamber." And he adds that the first she would not like, the second he would not like, while the third, would not be pleasing to either of them.

Take Care of the Pennies.

"Take care of the pennies" was evidently one of the general's mottoes. He weighed the toll money given to his ferryman, and if it was short weight the latter was made the loser. Yet once when General Stone, of Maryland, gave what weighed three halfpence over Washington wrapped up that amount in paper for delivery to Stone on his return. And returning from the army the landlord of Mount Vernon, on carefully measuring a room, found that a plasterer engaged in his absence had overcharged fifteen shillings. Some time afterward this plasterer died and his widow, upon remarrying, advertised that she would receive and pay all due to or by her former husband. Washington, upon reading the notice, made a demand for his fifteen shillings and received them.

A new contribution to knowledge of Washington's human side has just been made by W. K. Bixby, of St. Louis, who purchased and had printed for the first time, in a very limited presentation edition, the long-lost inventory of the Mount Vernon estate, as appraised by Washington's secretary, Tobias Lear, and three others in 1810. This, with the wills of George and Martha Washington, was filed in the Fairfax courthouse, whose records became scattered about the grounds in a Union raid in the Civil War. The captain of a Union company on the grounds at the time picked up several papers, among which he later found Mrs. Washington's will and the inventory. These he retained until his death, when they were sold, the will being bought by a prominent New York collector. George Washington's will, however, was never lost. An expert of the Congressional Library's manuscript division is now down at Fairfax Courthouse repairing it.

His Art Taste.

We now get our first knowledge from this inventory of the original contents of the rooms at Mount Vernon. It shows that the general's art taste ran mostly to war scenes and portraits of generals. He had upstairs some "Nymphs Bathing," an "Adonis Carried Off by Venus" and pictures of that class, but the greater part of the collection consisted of reproductions of unknown paintings, largely landscapes.

The scale on which the general lived at Mount Vernon is indicated by such items as "55 barrels of shad" and "117 barrels of herring," and there were counted on the estate 296 head of cattle, 33 horses, 77 mules, 336 sheep and 327 hogs. There were also 124 slaves on the place, "which Mrs. Washington intended liberating at the end of the year," and which were not appraised for that reason.

The mansion was filled with mahogany imported from England, and the valuations placed upon it by the appraisers will interest our modern collectors of antiques. The mahogany sideboard in the dining room was marked at $23, the knife cases $3 apiece, the mahogany chairs at $5 apiece, and the historic "key of the Bastile, with its representation" (meaning, evidently, the model of the prison), were valued at $10—with Lear as one of the appraisers! The general's "gold watch, two seals and a key" were valued at $175; his "diamond eagle" at $387, his shoe and knee buckles, "paste and gold, at $250. One item, corroborative of the evidence that the general was always having trouble with his teeth, is "one case of dentist's instruments," found in his study.

The total of personal property found on the Mount Vernon estate was appraised at $57,296.04, including $29,466.70 found "in the iron chest," and exclusive of the slaves. But, exclusive of this and of his wife's estate, the general, when he died, was worth $530,000, which means that in his day he ranked financially as a Vanderbilt or a Gould ranks to-day. And the Widow Custis, when she was married to him, had a fortune of $100,000, which was augmented by $50,000 upon the death of Patsy Custis, fourteen years later.

Was a "Ladies' Man."

The father of his country was ever a "ladies' man." Indeed, one of his biographers goes so far as to say that he was very much more at ease with women than with men. He was not ashamed to be caught "romping" with the girls at school, and when sixteen he became fascinated with Mary Cary, at Lord Fairfax's, but, in letters praising her, complains that "being in company with her revives my former passion for your lowland beauty." The identity of this "lowland beauty," who had warmed the heart of the country's father when he is only a lad, remains still a mystery. He coupled lovelorn verse with mysterious initials in his journal.

Then he was in love with Betsy Fauntleroy, who passed "a cruel sentence" upon him when he was nineteen. From the time he returned from the wars a young hero, in his early twenties, women commenced to court him. But when he was twenty-four Mary Philipse had the honor of refusing the slender young man who—had she but known it—was to be the first gentleman of America. Two years later he was courting Martha Dandridge Custis, the rich widow, whom one biographer sums up as "petite, overfond, hot-tempered, obstinate and a poor speller." He was almost twenty-seven when he married her and she was nine months his senior. He seems to have been always true to her, the only tangible evidences of his infidelities having been proved to be Tory forgeries circulated in England during the Revolution. Yet to other women whom he admired he was always openly the graceful courtier, the gallant cavalier. Writing, when forty-seven, to Lafayette, he presents his compliments to the latter's wife and sends her the message "that I have a heart susceptable of the tenderest passion and that it is already so strongly impressed with the most favorable ideas of her that she must be cautious of putting love's torch to it."

When he was sixty-three he wrote to Nellie Custis:

"In the composition of the human frame there is a good deal of inflammable matter, however dormant it may lie for a time."

Washington's sight failed during the revolution and he first put on glasses at forty-five. By fifty he was quite gray, by fifty-five quite deaf, and by sixty-three had lost his last tooth. His last illness was contracted at sixty-seven while riding about Mount Vernon in a winter storm, from which he contracted diphtheria. First an overseer came and bled him of a half pint of blood. Then the doctors came and bled him to death; and his last words, addressed to them, were: "You had better not take any more trouble about me, but let me go off quietly.

(Copyrigh, 1910, by John Elfreth Watkins.)